

Persona: Beyond the Fog

by Dragoon Swordsman

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Summary: After bouncing from one place to another for most of his life, Souji Seta finds himself in the sleepy town of Inaba. Over the next year, he will find himself drawn into a mystery beyond his imagination, and finally make some friends. Novelization of Persona 4, with emphasis on Souji's relationship with Naoto.

Persona: Beyond the Fog

None of this is mine.

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><p>Fog. That was all he could see at first, an endless, rolling fog. He couldn't even see his hands in front of his face. Straining his ears, at first he could hear nothing but the faint whisper of wind. Then a rumbling reached him, a car engine by the sound of it. Not a small car, either.<p>

His surroundings began to resolve themselves. With a brief start, he realized he was seated in a richly-appointed vehicle, probably a limousine. There was a second seat facing him, and a third a bit to his right, with what looked like a card table in between. Everything inside the vehicle, upholstery, table, and carpeting alike, was done in a somber blue.

Suddenly, it hit him that he wasn't alone. Seated at the other side of the table was a small, slightly hunched old man, with wispy white hair and an improbably long nose. He was dressed in a black suit that looked like it had come out of the late nineteenth century, and his eyes were closed.

Those eyes slowly opened. "Welcome," the old man said in a deep, almost whimsical voice, "to the Velvet Room."

\_The "Velvet Room"? What?\_ Long experience allowed the young man to maintain his composure, but he had no idea what to make of this one. Granted the upholstery looked and â€"he tested it with one handâ€" felt rather like velvet, but it was still a limo in the middle of a dense fog.

"It seems we have a guest with an intriguing destiny," the old man went on, chuckling softly. "My name is Igor. I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

"\_Igor," huh?\_ The teenager remained expressionless. \_Funny name for a funny-looking guy; he isn't Japanese, that's for sure.\_ He glanced out the window. \_Then again, I'm not sure I'm \_in\_ Japan right now.\_

"This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter," Igor said. "It is a room that only those who are bound by a 'contract' may enter. . . ."

\_Bound by a "contract"? Why do I not like the sound of that. . .?\_

"It may be that such a fate awaits you in the near future."

\_I \_definitely\_ don't like the sound of that. Getting bounced around every time Mom and Dad have some new business to take care of is bad enough. Now I'm going to enter some kind of contract that gives me access to the supernatural?\_

Igor smiled. "Now then. Why don't you introduce yourself?"

Harmless enough, and it was probably wise to be polite to mysterious supernatural beings of uncertain but likely considerable power. Even if he \_was\_ more than half convinced he was hallucinating. "Souji Seta," the teen said, inclining his head slightly.

"Hmm, I see," Igor nodded. "Now, let's take a look into your future, shall we?"

\_Oh, \_this'll\_ be fun\_.

"Do you believe in fortune telling?" Before Souji could reply, Igor waved his hand, and a deck of cards materialized on the table. Looking closely, Souji recognized them as Tarot. Another wave, and the deck spread out between them. "Each reading is done with the same cards, yet the result is \_always\_ different." He chuckled. "Life itself follows the same principles, doesn't it?"

Igor gestured, and a card flipped over. "Hmm. . . . The Tower in the upright position represents the immediate future. It seems a terrible catastrophe is imminent."

\_Nice, very nice. What kind of "catastrophe" are we talking about? A bit more warning would be nice; somehow I don't think he's talking about an earthquake or typhoon. . . .\_

"The card indicating the future beyond that is. . . ." Another flip. "The Moon, in the upright position. This card represents 'hesitation' and 'mystery'. . . . Very interesting indeed."

\_Interesting in the Chinese sense of the word,\_ Souji thought, wondering what was going on in that decidedly inhuman "although apparently not malevolent" mind.

"Mystery and catastrophe tend to be a nasty combination," he observed.

"Indeed they do, young Souji," Igor agreed. "It seems you will encounter a misfortune at your destination, and a great mystery will be imposed upon you." He waved a hand, nodding thoughtfully. "In the coming days, you will enter into a contract of some sort, after which you will return here."

Souji's lip twitched. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Igor smiled. "As will I. The coming year is a turning point in your destiny. . . . If the mystery goes unsolved, your future may be forever lost."

\_Great. Just great. Is he saying I'm going to be tossed into some kind of supernatural \_Sherlock Holmes\_ story?\_

"My duty is to provide assistance to our guests to ensure that does not happen."

"\_Guests," huh? So I'm not the first one. At least it confirms he's on my side . . . whatever that side is.\_ "I appreciate it," Souji said.

Igor waved his hand again, and the Tarot deck vanished. "Ah, I've neglected to introduce my assistant to you." He nodded to a woman sitting to one side. Slim, hair silver-white, dressed in a blue jacket, skirt, and heels, she had a similar aura to her superior. "This is Margaret. She is a resident of this place, like myself."

The woman smiled in greeting. "My name is Margaret. I am here to accompany you through your journey."

\_Not sure whether to be grateful or not. Seems nice enough, but this whole thing is a little too creepy.\_

"We shall attend to the details another time," Igor said, drawing Souji's attention back to him. "Until then, farewell."

Souji had roughly two million questions to ask, but the Velvet Room was already wavering. The last thing he saw before the darkness was Margaret's mysterious smile.

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><p>Monday, 11 April, 2011, late afternoon<p>

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><p>The train station was crowded, as usual for Japanese train lines.

Souji barely noticed, threading his way through the crowds to catch the train to Inaba. He'd been through the whole routine before, and likely would again. It was at the point that he'd long since gotten used to living out of the duffle bag slung over his right shoulder.<p>

\_Another year, another school.\_ He snorted mentally at the memory of his last day at his previous school. The announcement of his transfer had provoked a lot of talk among his classmates, but he wasn't fooled. Odds were they'd already forgotten about him, like the school before that, and the one before that. For a while he'd tried to keep in touch, but after so many moves it didn't seem worth the effort.

\_Everyone always forgets.\_ Souji firmly suppressed the old, familiar bitterness. He'd never doubted that his parents loved him, but they'd never seemed to understand. Never understood how he felt about having to pull up roots again and again. Eventually he'd stopped trying, realizing there was no point in the end.

Stepping to one side to avoid jostling an elderly couple, he glanced at a nearby bank of TVs, just in time to see a bikini-clad girl around his own age downing some kind of diet drink. He shook his head, recognizing the up-and-coming idol Rise Kujikawa. For all that he was barely a month past his seventeenth birthday, Souji cared little for celebrities.

The image had shifted to a news report as he was boarding the train, something about a TV announcer having an affair. He shook his head again, this time in faint disgust. Everyone's love lives seemed to be broadcast for all the world to see these days.

Well. At least Inaba would likely be free of that. A quiet rural town, his mother had said, a nice place to get away from it all. Not much there for a city boy, she'd told him apologetically, but good if you needed a break from all the hustle and bustle. Which, Souji had to admit, he did.

For some reason, though, the idea sparked something deep in his mind. He had a flash of what seemed like a memory, an image of an old man and a young woman on a blue background. It was gone almost as quickly as it came, leaving him wondering if it was just fatigue.

\_That must be it,\_ he decided, pulling out his cell phone. A text message was displayed on the screen. \_"Meet us outside Yasoinaba Station at 4 P.M."\_

From his uncle, Ryotaro Dojima. All Souji knew about him was he was his mother's younger brother, and lived in Inaba. As far as Souji knew, they'd never actually met. "Us" presumably meant Dojima and his daughter Nanako, Souji's cousin about whom he knew even less.

Sighing, he looked up, catching sight of his reflection in the window. Short silver hair, gray eyes, medium height, an athletic build honed by years of basketball and kendo training, he'd grown used to catching people's notice. Not that it ever seemed to matter; he'd long since learned most people didn't bother looking beneath the surface.

"Yasoinaba," the PA system blared. "Yasoinaba. All passengers for Yasoinaba Station. . . ."

\_That's me.\_ Souji hauled himself upright, slinging his duffle bag over his shoulder. \_Time for my first look at Inaba.\_

\* \* \*

><p>It was the quiet that hit him first, stepping off the platform. Having spent most of his life in places like Tokyo and Kyoto, major economic centers, Souji was accustomed to the hustle and bustle of city life, the constant rumble of car and bus engines, the cacophony of thousands of voices talking at once. In Inaba there was nothing like that; he could hear the occasional drone of a vehicle, but for the most part things were still.<p>

The smells were different, too. In the city there was an omnipresent odor of engine exhaust and gasoline, mixed with varying amounts of fast food, cigarette smoke, and sometimes garbage. Inaba smelled more of vegetation than anything else, with occasional whiffs of someone's cooking.

And imminent rain. Souji looked up, seeing the sky overcast. Unless he was much mistaken, Inaba was in for quite a downpour that evening. Best to find his host before he got wet.

"Hey, over here!"

Speak of the devil. A tall, dark-haired man in a suit was waving at him from a few meters away. Recognizing his uncle from the photo his mother had showed him, Souji crossed the distance in a few quick strides. Up close, he saw a dusting of stubble on his uncle's chin, and caught a faint hint of smoke.

Oh, well. Whatever their faults, his parents would never have sent him to stay with someone they were uncertain of, family or no, and smoking was hardly the worst vice to have. Beat excessive drinking, that much was for certain.

"You're more handsome than your photo," his uncle said. "I'm Ryotaro Dojima. Let's see, I'm your mother's younger brother, but you probably already knew that."

Souji offered a polite smile. "Pleased to meet you," he said, and meant it; Dojima came across as solid and reliable, traits he could well appreciate.

"Haha, why so formal?" Dojima smiled back. "Actually, this isn't the first time we've met, though you probably don't remember. I changed your diapers a few times when you were a baby."

\_First I've heard of it.\_ Souji wasn't surprised, though; Dojima would have been a logical choice for babysitter. Trust was at a premium in the circles his parents moved around in.

"And this is my daughter, Nanako," Dojima said, gently nudging a little girl forward. "C'mon, Nanako, introduce yourself to your cousin."

About six or seven years old, Souji estimated, dressed in a

pink-and-white blouse, darker skirt, and pink shoes. Distant though he tended to be, it wasn't in Souji Seta to be overly aloof with someone like that. "Hi, there," he said, crouching down.

She didn't answer, and appeared reluctant to meet his eyes. ". . 'Lo," she finally said, before darting back behind her father.

Dojima looked down at her, visibly puzzled. "What's wrong, Nanako? Why so shy?" That earned him an aggrieved look and a swat on the back, which seemed to amuse him more than anything else.

Despite his promise not to get too attached, Souji felt his lip twitch. His mother had told him Dojima was a widower, so it was a pleasure to see father and daughter so attached to each other. For a brief moment regret overrode his frustration at another move, regret that he could be nothing but an interloper, family or not.

"All right," Dojima said when he'd stopped laughing. "We'd better get going before it gets dark. You must be pretty tired from the trip."

Souji settled gratefully into the passenger seat of his uncle's SUV. Right then he was just looking forward to a good meal and a chance to relax; a slight rumbling his stomach, thankfully inaudible over the engine, reminded him that he hadn't eaten since before switching trains.

\_I wonder what the food's like here,\_ he thought idly. One of the few bright spots of moving around as much as he had was the chance to try new foods. He liked to think he'd become a fair cook himself, though he had no desire to go into the restaurant business.

Not that he was sure what he \_did\_ want, and that uncertainty had dogged him since he finished middle school. The most logical choice would have been to go into the family business, but he'd seen enough to be convinced corporate life wasn't for him. Boring as hell.

His thoughts ground to a halt as Dojima pulled into a gas station. To Souji's mild amusement, being in a sleepy town like Inaba didn't make for poor service; a yellow-clad attendant was there before they'd opened the doors.

"Hi, welcome to Moel!" the young woman said with a smile. "Need a fill-up?"

"Please," Dojima said. "Regular's fine."

"Right away, sir!" the attendant said, as Souji exited the car, stretching, followed closely by Nanako. "Are you going on a trip?"

Dojima shook his head. "He's my nephew, just moved here from the city. He'll be staying with us for a while." He looked around, while Nanako scurried off to the bathroom. "As good a time as any for a smoke," he murmured, going around to the back.

Souji leaned against the car, one hand in a pocket. Maybe it was just fatigue, but it was getting a little hard to think. The rather grim weather didn't help; it made the whole place seem stifled. Or maybe

it was just his imagination.

"From the city, huh?" the attendant said, sliding the hose in. "Not much for a city boy here."

"That's what my mother said before I left," Souji said. "Still, it's actually kind of a nice change. Nice to be away from the noise for a while."

The attendant chuckled softly. "Glad you think so. You'll probably just be hanging out with your friends or working part-time jobs when you're not in school."

\_I don't have any friends.\_ "Maybe," Souji conceded. "I'll be enrolling at Yasogami tomorrow, who knows after that."

"I know the place. Not the biggest school, but I hear they're pretty good." Withdrawing the hose, the attendant gave him a speculative look. "We're thinking of hiring some school kids. Maybe you could apply." She held out her hand.

Souji took it, and twitched as he felt something jolt. It was like an electric shock, and yet not. Well. Maybe he was imagining things.

"Are you ready to go?"

The attendant jumped slightly at Nanako's voice. "Sorry, I've gotta get back to work. Hope to see you again."

Nanako stopped by the rear door. "Are you okay?" she asked, looking at him worriedly. "You don't look so good. Did you get carsick?"

Mildly surprised that she was willing to talk to him, Souji gave a gentle shake of his head. "I'm just tired," he said. "It's been a long trip."

"Okay. We'll be home soon." Nanako managed a faint smile.

\_Home,\_ Souji thought as they piled back into the car. \_Does that word really mean anything for me?\_

\* \* \*

><p>Evening<p>

\* \* \*

><p><em>So this is where I'll be staying for the next year.<em>  
Looking around, Souji felt a twinge of envy. The Dojima residence was a modest two-story affair, not exactly luxurious, but comfortable. What made Souji envious despite his own affluent background was the atmosphere. Chisato Dojima had died years before, but her husband and daughter had nonetheless taken this house and made it unmistakably \_theirs\_. It was something Souji had never experienced in his many moves around the country.

"I ordered some takeout," Dojima said as they gathered around the small table. "Think of it as a way of welcoming you to Inaba." He

raised a can of soda. "First, a toast."

Souji raised his in turn. Good stuff, he had to admit. "Not bad."

"Glad you like it," Dojima said, smiling. "So, I understand you're here because your parents are working overseas."

"America," Souji confirmed, suppressing a twinge. \_It's not his fault\_. "Father said something about a major expansion in the American branch, so he and Mother are going to supervise the setup. Or something like that; the details got a bit jumbled."

"Mmm." Dojima nodded slowly. "Yeah, it's rough moving around so much when you're just a kid."

\_There's an understatement,\_ Souji thought, bitterness welling up again. "I've managed," he said, taking a bite of his dinner.

Judging by his expression, Dojima wasn't fooled. "I see. Well, just remember that you're part of our family, too. As long as you're in Inaba, this is your home."

Souji was torn between his fear of attachment, deeply ingrained after so many relocations, and an almost equally strong desire to enjoy the feeling of \_home\_ while he could, even if it was only for a little while. Seeing the way his uncle and even his shy cousin were looking at him, the desire for home won out, at least for the moment.

"I'll remember that," he said.

Dojima smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good. It'll be nice having some more company around for a while." There appeared to be more shades of meaning than the obvious, but before Souji could pursue the matter his uncle's cell phone beeped. "Damn, who would be calling at this time of night?"

Souji watched as Dojima's expression went from annoyed to downright grim. "I see. Where is it?" A pause. "All right, I'll be right there." He thumbed the phone off. "Looks like I made the right choice to skip the booze," he said, half to himself.

"Something wrong?" Souji asked quietly.

Dojima picked up his jacket. "Something came up at the office," he said. "You two go ahead and finish dinner; don't wait up for me." He passed out of sight, followed by the sound of the door sliding open. "Nanako, it's raining! What did you do with the laundry?"

"I already brought it in," Nanako called back.

\_She does the laundry?\_ Souji looked at his young cousin in surprise. \_She can't be more than seven years old. . . . Then again, with Aunt Chisato gone, she'd have had to grow up a little faster.\_

"All right. I'm off!" An engine coughed to life, and faded away in the distance.

Alone now with Nanako and the TV, Souji wondered if he should strike up a conversation. His little cousin looked forlorn in a way he found



all too familiar. It had hit him every time his parents had to work late, or they had to move yet again, uprooting him once more.

"What does your dad do?" Cliche, perhaps, but a six-year-old was unlikely to be expecting deep conversation.

"He investigates stuff, like crime scenes." Nanako appeared pleased by the question. "My Dad's a detective."

That explained Dojima's sudden grim look when he got the phone call. Souji had a sneaking suspicion that whatever his uncle had been called out for was going to be on the news the next day. From what he'd heard, there was little crime in Inaba beyond traffic tickets and occasional petty theft.

"Does this happen often?" Souji asked. Nanako just shook her head.

Perhaps fortunately, the TV provided a distraction. First just a weather report, predicting rain and fog for the next day or two, but even that was a welcome distraction. Following that was a news report, the same story he'd caught while changing trains.

"City Council secretary Taro Namatame is currently under fire for an alleged affair with a female reporter," the anchor said. "Eye Television has canceled all of announcer Mayumi Yamano's appearances until further notice. Until this situation is resolved, she will remain off the air and out of the public eye."

For all the good it was likely to do her. Scandals of that sort tended not to fade; if something like that stuck, the offender's career was almost invariably finished.

"This is boring," Nanako complained, voicing Souji's thoughts. She picked up the remote, changing the channel.

Then a familiar jingle sounded, an ad for the local Junes department store. Souji was familiar enough with Junes; there'd been one in just about every area he'd lived in. For that matter, he was pretty sure his father owned a lot of Junes stock.

"At Junes, every day is Customer Appreciation Day! Come see for yourself, and get in touch with our products!" A pitch Souji must've heard a thousand times before. "Every day's great at your Junes!"

To his mild bemusement, Nanako brightened on seeing the ad. "Every day's great at your Junes!" she sang, swaying back and forth.

"Big Junes fan, eh?" Souji said, smiling despite himself.

"Uh-huh," Nanako replied, smiling brightly. "I love Junes! Dad takes me there whenever he can."

Nice of him. "That's good," Souji said, going back to his dinner.

The rest of the evening was spent in a comfortable silence. Nanako, fortunately, seemed to have gotten over her unease at Souji's presence, though she was still a bit shy. Remarkable self-possessed for a six-year-old, all things considered.

Half an hour later, Souji was stifling a yawn. "I'd better turn in for the night; it's been a long day, and I'm starting school tomorrow."

Nanako gave an absent nod, her eyes fixed on the TV once again. "Okay. G'night."

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><p>Dojima certainly wasn't stinting on accommodations. A trifle small, perhaps, but no more so than some of the rooms Souji had stayed in over the years, and comfortably furnished. The room's center was dominated by a low work table, with a sofa below the window. A study desk stood in one corner, with space for a futon next to it. Bookshelves lined another wall, and a small TV stood on a cabinet opposite the sofa.<p>

He was grateful to see his futon had already been laid out. "That trip took more out of me than I thought," he said to the air, dropping his bag on the floor. \_I'll finish unpacking tomorrow. Right now I just need some sleep.\_

There remained one thing he wanted to do before bed. Reaching into his bag, Souji withdrew a framed photo, taken on his seventeenth birthday. His mother and father smiled out at him, with Souji between them. It was a reminder that they really did care about him, even if it didn't seem like it sometimes.

\_Home for the next year,\_ he thought, lying back on his futon and turning off the light. \_Could be worse, I guess.\_

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><p>Souji wasn't usually aware when he was dreaming, but his current surroundings were too bizarre to be anything else. Everything around him was shrouded in a dense fog. All he could see besides his own body (dressed in his Yasogami uniform, he noted absently) was a path that looked vaguely like brick, and even that was only visible for a couple of meters.<p>

Well. No sense just standing around. Picking up the sword his father had passed on to him, he took off at a light jog. The path, fortunately, was solid, and as long as he moved in a straight line there was no real danger of falling. Assuming there was anywhere \_to\_ fall.

"If it's truth you desire, come find me. . . ."

The voice was coming from up ahead; Souji couldn't tell if it was male or female. He sighed, gripped his sword more firmly, and increased his pace. Whatever was going on, he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

A couple of minutes' running brought him to some kind of door. Or perhaps portal was a better term, an opening in the space before him,

with a square red and black frame. He reached a hand up, touching the frame, and it slowly turned and expanded, allowing him through.

More fog greeted him on the other side. Within it, Souji saw a humanoid form, too indistinct to make out any real detail. When he squinted, he thought the form had its arms folded, but he couldn't be certain.

"So, you are the one pursuing me." The apparition hummed softly, the sound contemplative and faintly amused. "Try all you like. . .  
."

Taking it as a challenge, and growing tired of the game, Souji set himself and lunged forward, bringing his katana around in a basic strike. He felt the blade hit something, but he was fairly sure it wasn't natural.

"Hmm, it seems you can see a little, despite the fog." There was a note of interest in the voice.

Souji gritted his teeth. "What's your point?" he demanded, lunging again with an overhand swing. Again, it connected with something he couldn't describe.

"I see. . . . Indeed, you possess an interesting quality."

"I'm glad you like it," Souji bit out, feeling like he was being toyed with. Shifting tactics, he crushed a card that had appeared in his right hand, summoning a shade that struck his tormentor with a bolt of lightning.

The form appeared unaffected. "But . . . you will not catch me so easily. If what you seek is 'truth,' then your search will be even harder. . . ." More fog billowed out, obscuring the other completely.

First mind games, now this. Enough already! Souji swung once, twice, three times, each time striking nothing but air. Seeing this, he paused to catch his breath. Losing his temper would help no one, and could result in serious injury, as his kenjutsu instructor had told him years before.

"Everyone sees what they want to, and the fog only deepens."

Okay, this is really getting on my nerves. "Mind giving me a straight answer?" Souji said, trying in vain to see through the fog.

"Will we meet again?" the apparition wondered, ignoring his question. "At a place other than here. Hmm, I look forward to it."

Souji tried to ask again what the apparition meant, but the fog-shrouded limbo he was in was beginning to fade. He tried to focus, but his mind was fading along with his surroundings. The last thing he heard was the apparition's meditative chuckle.

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><p>Tuesday, 12 April, early morning<p>

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><p>"Breakfast is ready."<p>

Souji pushed himself up, feeling groggier than he should have. He felt like he'd had some kind of dream, but couldn't for the life of him remember what it was. After another moment of thought, he brushed it aside; it wasn't the first time it had happened, and undoubtedly would not be the last. Besides, the smell of bacon and eggs reminded him of more important matters.

A minute later he was downstairs, already dressed in his new Yasogami uniform. He gave them credit for style, at least; a white shirt with black trousers and blazer was close enough to his own preferred outfit. It was reasonably comfortable, too.

"Good morning, Nanako-chan," he said, noting the bacon, eggs, and toast his cousin had set out. She was pouring orange juice as he sat down. "Did your father already leave?"

She shook her head. "He didn't come home last night. Too busy."

There was a distinct note of disappointment in the girl's voice. Souji could relate; he'd lost track of the number of times his father or mother â€"sometimes bothâ€" had worked late, early, through lunch, or various combinations thereof. Combined with the frequent moves, it had left him feeling adrift all too often.

He took a bite of toast. "Do you cook?"

"A little," Nanako said. "I can make toast, and cook sunny-side-up eggs in the morning."

Not much, but still surprising for a girl her age. Souji himself hadn't really started cooking until he was ten, though to be sure his family could afford more than Nanako and her father. He wasn't sure whether to be impressed or saddened by Nanako's maturity.

"It's good," he said, and meant it. "I haven't had a nice home breakfast in a long time, not even one this simple."

Nanako brightened at that. "Really? That's great!" She took a long gulp orange juice. "You're starting school today, right?" Souji nodded. "My school's on the way, so let's go together."

"Sounds good to me," Souji agreed. He was still reluctant to get too attached, but at least a family member like Nanako could be counted on to keep in touch afterward. He still heard from his paternal grandfather, after all.

Maybe, just maybe, this year was going to be salvageable.

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><p>The rain from the previous night hadn't slackened in the least. Souji didn't mind overmuch; the downpour gave the little town a feeling of life. Nanako's presence helped; she'd from all appearances gotten over whatever lingering uneasiness she may have felt, and happily chattered away as they walked. He was still grateful for his

umbrella.<p>

They paused halfway down the street on the Samegawa River flood plain. "You keep going straight," Nanako said. She pointed off to the north. "My school's this way. Bye!"

"Have a good day, Nanako-chan," Souji said, waving. "See you tonight." His cousin waved back before passing out of sight.

Now alone, Souji resumed his walk. The route to Yasogami was easy enough to follow, if only because he saw a number of people his age in the same uniform he now wore. Voices drifted back, too indistinct to be heard over the rain, but he had the impression they weren't happy. Not that he was surprised; high school was the bane of teenagers the world over, after all.

\_Especially for someone like me,\_ he thought, his mood darkening some. \_Having to get used to a new school every year isn't easy.\_ He shook his head. No point in dwelling on it, especially after he'd just found something \_good\_ for a change.

Souji had just reached the last intersection before the school when he heard a loud squeaking noise. He glanced back over his shoulder, and took a hurried step to one side as another student careened past on a yellow bicycle. The other student swerved madly, only to crash into a lamppost.

\_That had to hurt.\_ The other yasogami student, a brown-haired boy around Souji's age, stood doubled over in obvious pain, his bike in a heap on the ground. Souji paused, wondering if he should offer aid, then shrugged mentally. \_Probably better to just leave him.\_

Leaving the incapacitated student behind, Souji crossed to a gentle incline leading up to Yasogami High School. As he looked up at the unremarkable buildings, he wondered idly what kind of school year it was going to be. Over the course of his many moves, he'd found that every school, every student body, every faculty was different. He couldn't help but be just a little curious about Yasogami's.

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><p><em>What did I do to deserve this?<em> Souji's mood had soured just about the instant he met his new homeroom teacher. Kinshiro Morooka was middle-aged, thin, and walked with an odd lurch. Dressed in a blue suit, with thinning black hair and teeth that from all appearances hadn't been within sight of a dentist in at least twenty years, he looked like a thoroughly unpleasant individual. Souji tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, knowing better than most that looks could deceive.

Alas, looks were in Morooka's case all too accurate.

Souji had to fight to keep from scowling as he followed Morooka into Class 2-2. Like the rest of the building, it had a rustic air, with old-style desks, a blackboard in front, and a simple lectern for the teacher to stand behind. Nothing fancy, as was to be expected in a small country school.

"All right, shut your traps!" Morooka snapped, stilling the murmurs. "I'm Kinshiro Morooka, your homeroom teacher from today forward." He

glared at the assembled students. "First things first! Just 'cause it's spring doesn't mean you can swoon over each other like love-struck baboons."

\_You're the baboon, Sensei,\_ Souji thought, fighting to maintain his composure. How someone like that got to be a teacher in the first place, he had no idea.

Morooka, fortunately, didn't notice. "Long as I'm around, you students are going to be pure as the driven snow!"

\_And what would \_you\_ know about being pure? You smell like cheap sake.\_

His new teacher finally acknowledged his presence; Souji wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. "Now I hate wasting my time, but I'd better introduce this transfer student. This sad sack's been thrown from the big city out to the middle of nowhere like yesterday's garbage."

\_Okay, \_Sensei\_, you're \_really\_ pushing it.\_

"And he's just as much of a \_loser\_ here as he was there, so you girls better not get any ideas about hitting on him." Morooka turned his glare on Souji. "Tell 'em your name, kid, and make it quick."

Souji took a deep breath. He'd dealt with nasty teachers before, but this Morooka was in a class of his own. "You calling me a loser, \_sir\_?" he asked coldly.

He had the brief satisfaction of seeing Morooka's face turn an interesting shade of puce. For a moment he entertained the faint thought "more like wish" that this fugitive from the dentist's office might actually have a stroke. Sadly, it was not to be.

"Why, you!" Morooka snapped something Souji didn't quite catch. He was more interested in the muttering that had started up. Half the class seemed to think he was insane, while the other half was impressed. "Listen up! This town is miles away from your big city of perverts and lowlifes in more ways than one! So don't even think about getting involved with any of the girls here, let alone abusing them!"

\_Who I get involved with is none of your business, \_Sensei\_, and I'm thinking you're the one who's more likely to be an abuser.\_

"But what do I know?" The sarcasm was so thick you could cut it with a knife and serve it on toast. "It's not like the old days. Even here, kids grow up so damn fast. Every time I turn around you're fooling around on your damn phones, checking your life-journals and you're my-places."

Souji barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes at that. \_Sorry, Sensei, I don't use social media. Got better things to do with my time.\_

Morooka's rant went for what seemed like hours, but by the wall clock was only around five minutes. It was interrupted, blessedly, when one of the class raised her hand. "Excuse me, is it okay if the transfer

student sits here?" She indicated an empty seat next to her.

Morooka looked briefly irritated, then shrugged. "Huh? Yeah, sure." He shot a nasty look at Souji. "Hear that? Your seat's over there. Hurry up and sit down."

\_Anything to get away from you.\_ Souji walked over and sat at the indicated desk. "Thanks," he murmured. "I wasn't sure how much more of that I could stand."

His new classmate, an athletic girl who wore a yellow-trimmed light green windbreaker over her uniform, gave him a sympathetic smile. "He's the worst, huh? Rotten luck for you to get stuck in \_this\_ class. Guess we'll just have to hang in there for a year."

"Yeah," Souji replied, keeping an eye on Morooka. "I've know some nasty teachers, but this guy tops them all."

Judging by the amount of muttering, he'd caused something of a stir. "Sucks to be the transfer student, ending up in King Moron's class the first morning here," a male voice said.

\_King Moron? I'll have to remember that one.\_

"Yeah, he won't think twice about suspending you if you get on his bad side," a female voice answered. "Then again, we're all in the same boat."

"Shut your traps!" Evidently King Moron had had enough of the noise. "I'm taking roll, and I damn well expect you to respond in an orderly manner."

\_This is going to be a \_fun\_ year,\_ Souji thought. \_I get to spend the morning listening to this guy six days a week? And I thought Father's corporate boardroom meetings were bad.\_ \_And he teaches philosophy? I don't think I want to know what philosophy produced \_that\_ attitude.\_

"Just hang in there," the athletic girl said quietly. Listening to King Moron's grating voice, Souji appreciated the encouragement.

\* \* \*

><p>After School<p>

\* \* \*

><p>It had been the longest first day of school in Souji's memory. King Moron's holier-than-thou sermons, interspersed with talks from other teachers (one of whom had a hand puppet made to look like his own face), had made minutes stretch into hours. He was grateful when Morooka finally wrapped up.<p>

"That's all for today," the harsh-voiced teacher said. "Normal lectures will start tomorrow."

Souji traded despairing looks with the girl next to him. "Normal lectures" from a man like Morooka were likely to be daily scoldings. The man was like one of the teachers in that weird Western fantasy series Souji had read, but with an even worse attitude.

\_How did this guy get to be a teacher?\_

Morooka was beginning to stalk off, but the school's PA system stopped him. "Attention, all teachers. Please report to the faculty office for a brief staff meeting. All students are to return to their classrooms and remain there until further notice."

King Moron's face twisted in disgust. "You heard the announcement," he said. "Stay put until you hear otherwise!" Muttering under his breath, he stomped out.

Souji scrubbed his hands over his face. "What a way to start the new school year," he muttered. "I get a homeroom teacher who thinks his students are some kind of plague."

"King Moron's got a rep for that," the athletic girl said, running a hand through her short brown hair in frustration. "Anyway, looks like we're stuck here for now." She smiled suddenly. "Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. My name's Chie Satonaka."

"Souji Seta," Souji replied, smiling politely. "I'm used to being the new kid â€"I've moved around a lotâ€" but this is just about rock-bottom." The smile became a frown, as a familiar sound reached his ears.

From her expression, Chie heard it, too. "Sirens?"

"Police sirens," Souji agreed. "I wonder what's going on."

Several other students were evidently wondering the same thing, gathering by the window in obvious excitement. Not that there was much to see; the rain from earlier had been replaced by a dense fog, limiting visibility to the school grounds and a bit beyond.

"What's going on?" a male student wondered. "All those sirens. . . . Nah, can't see a thing. Damn fog."

Whatever it was, Souji knew, it had to be something major. One seldom heard sirens in a sleepy rural town like Inaba. \_If I was into betting, I'd bet everything I had that this is whatever got my uncle called in last night.\_

The other students were still chattering. "Hey, get this," another boy said. "I heard something juicy." He said something too quiet for Souji to hear.

It must have been quite the bombshell, because the first boy visibly rocked back on his heels. "Seriously!?" He crossed over to the desk in front of Chie's, occupied by a black-haired girl in red. "H-Hey, Yukiko-san. Can I ask you something? Is it true that announcer is staying at your family's inn?"

Rumor-mongers. Just great. Souji knew the type all too well. He'd been the subject of rumors himself more than once, usually with the whole "mysterious transfer student" canard. It had always blown over in the end, but that didn't make it any more pleasant.

He wasn't surprised when Yukiko shook her head. "I can't talk about that."



Souji would have thought that obvious, but judging by his reaction it hadn't even occurred to the inquisitive student. The other boy stammered a hurried apology and rejoined his friends.

Typical high school students, Souji conceded. Always on the lookout for the next bit of juicy gossip. He even sympathized to a degree; anyone stuck with Kinshiro Morooka for a homeroom teacher would be desperate for something to distract from the misery.

With a tired grunt, Chie heaved herself out of her chair. "Just how long is this going to take, anyway?" she grumbled.

"Who knows," Yukiko said, sighing.

Chie hung her head. "I should've just left before the announcement came up."

"Probably a bad idea," Souji put in. "It came on before King Moron left, and I'll bet he'd have blasted you to cinders if you'd walked out under his nose. Besides," his voice turned grim, "you'd have walked right into whatever those sirens were about."

"You're probably right," Chie said dejectedly. She looked back at Yukiko. "Oh, did you try what I told you about the other day?" At her friend's puzzled look, she went on, "You know, that thing about rainy nights."

"Oh." Yukiko still looked puzzled, but shook her head. "Not yet, sorry. I've been too busy."

Chie waved a hand. "Nah, don't worry about it. I just heard a guy from another class yelling, 'My soul mate is Yamano, the announcer!' or something like that."

An urban legend by the sound of it. Souji had heard plenty of strange stories over the years, all of which had turned out to be either exaggerated or baseless. Even the Nyxist incident from the previous January had been little more than a generic doomsday cult, from what he'd heard.

The PA system chimed again. "Attention, all students. There has been an incident inside the school district. Police officers have been dispatched around the school zone. Please stay calm and contact your parents or guardians as soon as possible, and quickly leave the school grounds. Do not disturb the officers. Head directly home."

Souji shouldered his bag, ignoring his classmates' sudden excitement. Can't exactly contact my guardian, since he's probably one of the officers on the scene. It had to be a major accident at the least; nothing less would get this kind of attention. Which in turn meant his uncle was unlikely to be home for dinner.

"Are you going home by yourself?" Chie and her friend had approached while he collected his books. "Why don't you come with us?" She gestured to the other girl. "This is Yukiko Amagi."

Most guys Souji had known would have described Yukiko Amagi as a knockout. Dark eyes, raven hair that fell just past her shoulders, a

slim figure, ivory skin, she was as classically beautiful as anyone Souji had seen. Not really his type, though; classical beauty didn't do much for him.

"A pleasure to meet you," he said, inclining his head in greeting.

Yukiko's smile was just a bit shaky. "Nice to meet you, too. I'm sorry this is so sudden."

Souji shook his head, forestalling Chie's protest. "Don't worry about it. After listening to Morooka talk for hours, some friendly company is nice." He lifted an eyebrow at Chie. "You've got some questions for me?"

She blushed faintly. "Was it that obvious?"

"Not to most people," Souji told her, "but I've been through this before. And no," he waved a hand, "you're not bothering me." He smiled faintly. "You're actually a lot nicer than most."

The trio moved for the door, but stopped when the student Souji had seen on the way to school approached them. Slightly taller than Souji, with messy brown hair, he had a pair of headphones draped over his neck. He looked at Chie as though he expected her to lash out.

"Um, Miss Satonaka?"

No mistake, that was the voice of someone who expected to be beaten within an inch of his life. Souji glanced at Chie in the corner of his eye. She didn't look particularly hostile, but he had a sneaking suspicion that was about to change.

"This was awesome," the frightened student went on. "Incredible fight scenes. . . ."

Chie's eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "And?"

The other visibly gulped. "I-It was an accident!" he blurted. "Please, at least have mercy until my next paycheck!" He handed her what looked like a DVD case and dashed for the door.

Eyes narrowing further, Chie pursued him. "Stop right there! Just what did you do to my DVD!?" There was a loud whack and a chopped-off cry of pain.

Souji winced in sympathy. Chie had driven a vicious kick right between the other student's legs, a place no guy ever wants to be kicked. She ignored his obvious pain, opening the DVD case.

Her sound of outrage hurt as much as the kick clearly had. "It's cracked clean through! My Trial of the Dragon!" Quivering with rage, to the point that Souji was faintly surprised not to see smoke coming out of her ears, she ignored her victim's groaning.

Yukiko seemed more sympathetic. "Are you all right?"

That appeared to give him the barest glimmer of hope. "Yukiko-san, are you worried about me?"

"He's fine, Yukiko," Chie interrupted before Yukiko could respond.  
"Come on, let's go."

Following after the two girls, Souji paused to look at the unfortunate student, still doubled over in pain. After a brief moment he walked on, making a mental note to never get on Chie Satonaka's bad side.

\* \* \*

><p>Chie and Yukiko, thankfully, turned out to be pleasant company. Her display of temper aside, Chie was a cheerful and friendly sort; as Souji had suspected from the title of that wrecked DVD, she was a martial arts enthusiast. Yukiko was more demure, but Souji got the distinct impression that it was at least partly stress. He'd seen it before.<p>

They'd just reached the school gate when a male student approached Yukiko. Not a Yasogami student; his uniform was different, a black suit with dark green tie. Something about him raised the hair on the back of Souji's neck, possibly the fishlike stare. He felt an almost instinctive revulsion.

"You're Yuki, right?" the boy said. His voice matched his face, low and with a decidedly creepy undertone. "You want to go hang out somewhere?"

This one's trouble, Souji thought. Coming up out of nowhere to ask someone you've never met on a date? That would be a red flag even without the fishy stare.

Unsurprisingly, Yukiko was taken aback. "Huh? Um, who are you?"

We're drawing a crowd, Souji noted absently. At least five other students had gathered around, watching with interest. Not to surprising, he supposed; with Inaba as quiet as it normally was, any unusual event was probably a relief, however minor.

"Who's that guy?" one of them wondered. "I don't recognize the uniform."

Another gave a brief snort. "Forget who, the guy's going for Yukiko-san? Seriously, you'd think he'd at least wait until she's alone."

The first chuckled. "Bet a can of TaP he gets knocked out." Presumably by Chie; Souji had already noticed she was protective of Yukiko.

"No bet. Haven't you heard how tough the Amagi Challenge is?"

Part of Souji wondered what exactly the "Amagi Challenge" was. Maybe it was simply the difficulty in asking Yukiko out; it was obvious that she was popular. And equally obvious that this fish-faced unknown didn't have a chance.

"So, a-are you coming?" the stranger finally asked.

Yukiko looked at him for a moment, and shook her head. "No."

The stranger's face twisted into a mixture of disappointment and anger. For a brief moment Souji thought he was going to lash out. "Fine!" he snapped instead, and took off at a run.

"Well, that was one of the creepier things I've seen lately," Souji said.

Yukiko was looking puzzled. "What did he want with me, anyway?"

"He wanted to ask you out on a date, of course!" Chie said.

"And he was really creepy about it," Souji added, shaking his head. "Those eyes made me think of a landed fish."

Truth be told, he'd been rather unnerved by the whole incident. He had little experience with dating, mainly because of his frequent moves, but even he knew Yukiko's would-be suitor had gone about things exactly the wrong way.

A slow cacophony of squeaks drew his attention. "Yo, Yukiko-san." Chie's acquaintance had apparently recovered. "Turned down another lovelorn fool, eh?" He chuckled ruefully. "You're really cruel sometimes; got me the same way last year."

"Did I?" Yukiko had a blank look on her face. "I don't remember."

"That so?" The bicyclist seemed to brighten. "Want to hang out sometime, then?"

As practically anyone could have predicted, Yukiko shook her head again. "I'd rather not."

"Figures. That'll teach me to get my hopes up." Smiling just a bit ruefully, he mounted his bike. "See you guys later. Don't bug the transfer student too much, okay?"

"I can handle myself," Souji said mildly. "It's nothing I haven't gone through a dozen times already."

"If you say so. See you tomorrow."

Chie stared after him, visibly fuming. Souji had to hide a smile; Chie, it appeared, could be quite mercurial. A far cry from the kind of ditzy fan girls he'd attracted at his last school, and something of a relief at that. Whatever else she was, Chie Satonaka wasn't boring.

"We might want to get moving," he suggested. "We're drawing a crowd as it is."

Relieved at finding a sympathetic ear or two after a day of listening to Morooka, Souji was more than pleased to answer their questions. Chie's, at least; Yukiko said little beyond an occasional interjection. Shy, he supposed, or maybe just tired.

He spoke of the places he'd lived in over the years, from Tokyo, to Kyoto, to Osaka and other cities. His family business had kept him on

the go, giving him a lot of material. Chie's face brightened when he mentioned attending a film festival, even though it had only been part of his father's business.

"So that's how you ended up here," Chie said around fifteen minutes later. "I thought it was \_way\_ more serious."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Souji said. "I may have moved around a lot, but I'm still just an ordinary guy."

Chie shook her head hurriedly. "No, it's all right! I'm just sorry we don't really have anything to show you." She looked past Yukiko, over the quiet fields. "There's not much here to interest someone from the big city."

Souji smiled faintly. "Trust me, the peace and quiet are worth it. Even a city boy like me needs a break from all the noise once in a while." His smile faded. "Makes me wish I could stay longer. . .  
."

By the look on her face, Chie wanted to ask what he meant, but wisely chose not to press the matter. It wasn't that Souji objected to talking; he just didn't want to inflict his personal bitterness on anyone else.

"Well, we do have some pottery that's sort of famous," Chie said. "Or maybe it's our dyed clothes. . . ." She trailed off, and then inspiration seemed to strike. "Oh, and there's the Amagi Inn! It's been in some travel magazines as a hidden treasure!" She nodded at her friend. "Yukiko's family owns it, and she's in training to take over management."

"Is that so?" Souji looked at the raven-haired girl with new interest. She hadn't struck him as the business-savvy type, but then he of all people knew looks could deceive.

For her part, Yukiko seemed embarrassed. "It's nothing special, just an old inn."

Chie gave her a look of fond exasperation. "She might say it's an old inn, but it attracts lots of visitors every year. It's pretty much what keeps this town going."

"A lot of people like the rustic atmosphere," Souji agreed. "That kind of thing is common all over the world." Tourism, he knew from his father's many lectures on the subject, was often a matter of economic life or death for small towns like Inaba.

\_I'm thinking like an investor,\_ he thought in vague amusement.  
\_Guess Father's lectures really did take, even if they were more boring than watching grass grow.\_

Chie chose that moment to interrupt his reverie. "So. . . . Yukiko's pretty cute, don'tcha think?"

That drew him up short. Yukiko was attractive, certainly, but the way Chie had said it caught him off guard. It brought back memories of the one time his parents had tried to set him up with someone. The girl had been a beauty much like Yukiko, but Souji had been unable to formulate much of a response. This was no different.

"I couldn't really say," he finally said.

Chie nodded, looking faintly apologetic. "Sorry, I shouldn't have put you on the spot like that. You did just get here."

That wasn't the only reason. Yukiko was looking even more embarrassed, and Souji didn't want to add to it. The poor girl looked stressed-out enough as it was.

"Chie," she said plaintively, "not this again."

Chie showed no sign of hearing, looking back at Souji. "She's really popular at school, but she's never had a boyfriend! Can you believe it?"

Souji could, actually. Attractive or not, Yukiko didn't strike him as the type who would go out with just anyone. She'd have attracted a lot of interest, but likely was too nervous to seriously consider it.

"Come on," Yukiko protested. She sent a nervous glance at Souji. "D-Don't believe everything she says, okay? It's not that I couldn't get a boyfriend. . . ." She trailed off, blushing faintly. "Geez, Chie."

Chie gave a small laugh. "Sorry, sorry! It's just that this is our first real chance to talk to someone from the big city, and you've barely said a word."

"It's all right," Souji interjected before Yukiko could reply. Movement ahead of them caught his eye. "Huh?"

In a twist of fate, their chosen route had taken them straight into the "incident" the school announcement had spoken of. So Souji judged by the police line and rubbernecking passers-by, at any rate. A small roadblock, a couple of squad cars, at least one uniformed officer, and a small chattering crowd were unlikely for anything else.

Souji felt a twinge of unease. He strongly suspected his uncle was present, possibly in charge of the investigation. Which meant there was a distinct possibility he was in for a more personal scolding than Chie and Yukiko risked. On the other hand, they had been showing him around, so it was possible he could get off on grounds of having taken a wrong turn.

"I can't believe they found that hanging from an antenna!" The speaker was a woman, early thirties by the look of her, probably a housewife.

"I know! I wanted to see it, too." Another housewife, that was."

"Oh, you're just too late," the first said. "They took it down just a moment ago."

The second looked mildly disappointed. "It's frightening, though. A dead body, hanging from a TV antenna?"

Chie froze in her tracks. "A-A dead b-body?" she

stammered.

\_Murder,\_ Souji thought at once. \_No way a body ends up hanging from a \_TV antenna\_ by accident.\_ He supposed it \_might\_ have been suicide, as he was hardly a criminology expert, but it seemed unlikely. An awkward way to kill oneself if nothing else.

It also made him all the more uneasy. His uncle was virtually certain to be involved in a murder investigation, especially given how shorthanded the Inaba Police Department was. From what Dojima had let slip on the way home the previous day, a quiet town like Inaba wasn't exactly high on the prefectural office's priority list.

"All right, coming through!"

Souji felt a lump of ice form in his gut. There he was, all right, pushing through the crowd with an expression of deep irritation. Catching sight of Souji and his companions, he opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Before Dojima could speak, a younger man in a black suit dashed past, one hand over his mouth. Realizing what was about to happen, Souji hurriedly turned his head away. The sounds of retching were too much as it was.

Dojima looked more exasperated than anything else. "Adachi, how long are you going to act like a rookie!? You want to get sent back to the central office?"

"Sorry, sir," the younger man choked out. "Ugh."

Dojima sighed. "Get yourself cleaned up. We still have to canvass the area." He turned back to Souji. "And what are you three doing here?"

Knowing he had to choose his words \_very\_ \_carefully\_, Souji took a deep breath. "We're just passing through." Probably the most cliché reply imaginable, but it was the plain truth. "Chie-san and Yukiko-san were telling me about Inaba and asking me about the places I've lived." He shrugged helplessly. "I guess we weren't looking where we were going."

Dojima pinched the bridge of his nose. "That damn principle, we told him not to let the students come through here." He sighed again. "All right." He looked at Chie and Yukiko. "I'm Detective Dojima, Souji's guardian. How do I put this, I hope you get along with him."

"We'll try," Chie assured him.

He managed a smile at that. "Good. Now, you three had better get home. Souji, tell Nanako that you're not to wait up for me."

"I will," Souji said.

Dojima nodded, beckoned to Adachi, and disappeared into the crowd.

Souji released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. \_That could have been really, \_really\_ bad.\_ The last thing he needed was to antagonize the man who was taking care of him, especially since he

was a police detective. Would make family dinners too awkward.

Chie was still wide-eyed. "You're staying with him?" she breathed.

"My uncle," Souji explained. "It's him and his daughter, my cousin Nanako."

Swallowing a bit, Chie nodded. "I think he was right, we should get home. Maybe we'll go to Junes next time. Later."

"See you tomorrow, Souji-kun," Yukiko said as they left.

Time for Souji to go home, too. Nanako, he thought with a slight pang, was probably lonely. As he made his departure, though, he paused and looked back over his shoulder. Something about the incident was nagging at him, as if it was more important than was immediately apparent.

He shook his head. Probably imagining things; as he'd said to Chie and Yukiko, he was just an ordinary high school student, for all his moves. Nothing special.

\* \* \*

><p>Evening<p>

\* \* \*

><p>To compensate for his uncle's absence, Souji made a point of fixing dinner, something beyond the TV dinners and takeout Dojima and Nanako usually had. It wasn't particularly elaborate, but different enough from the usual to be a pleasant change. Nanako was certainly appreciative.<p>

Now the pair sat at the low table in the living room, watching TV for lack of anything else to do. Souji checked his watch; 7 PM, and no sign of Dojima. Not that he expected any different with a murder investigation going on.

"Looks like Dad won't be coming home tonight," Nanako said dejectedly.

"I know how you feel," Souji murmured. "Both of my parents usually work late, though my father almost never spends the night at the office. Almost." He stopped himself before he opened old wounds.

The weather report came on. Overcast the next day, probably more rain and fog after that. Souji's first thought was that it would make his uncle's job harder, with evidence being literally washed away. Not to mention the difficulty of simple navigation in that kind of weather.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the TV chimed. "Our top story concerns a bizarre case in a quiet suburb. Around noon today, a woman was found dead near the Samegawa River in Inaba."

\_That's the School Zone here.\_ Souji leaned forward slightly, gray eyes intent. \_This must be what Uncle Ryotaro and his partner were investigating.\_



"The deceased has been identified as Ms Mayumi Yamano, a 27-year-old announcer at a local television station."

\_Wasn't she the one who got caught having an affair?\_ Souji frowned, thinking. \_Yeah. An affair with someone named Namatame.\_

"The Inaba Police Department's initial investigations have revealed. . . ."

Nanako's sharp inhalation drowned out the TV. "The Inaba Police Department! That's where Dad works!"

Souji nodded. "I ran into him on the way home from school," he confirmed. Seeing his cousin's worried look, he said, "It's all right. He was fine when I saw him; mainly mad at the crowds and his partner."

"I know," Nanako said, nodding back. "It's his job. Things like this happen."

Surprisingly mature for a six-year-old, but Souji wasn't about to criticize. A girl in her position had to grow up faster than normal. \_Maybe we have more in common than I thought.\_

"The body was found hanging from a television antenna on a local resident's roof," the TV anchor went on. "As of this broadcast, the police have no suspects and no motive."

\_Of course they don't. What kind of lunatic hangs a body from a TV antenna?\_ Souji frowned. \_And how did it get up there without anyone noticing? That's not exactly inconspicuous.\_

"With the cause of death still unknown, the police continue to investigate whether this was an accident or a homicide."

Souji was convinced it was homicide. It would take a truly improbable accident for a person to wind up dead and hanging from someone else's TV antenna. Granted that still left the question of how and why the murderer would hang the body up there to begin with.

"A thick fog common to the area has slowed progress, and plans to fully canvass the area are delayed until tomorrow."

Which meant Dojima almost certainly wasn't coming home that night. As understaffed as the Inaba police were, he was likely swamped with work.

"They found her on a roof?" Nanako gasped. "That's scary! Oh," her expression changed abruptly, "it's Junes!"

The same ad he'd seen the previous night was running. "At Junes, every day is Customer Appreciation Day. Come see for yourself, and get in touch with our products! Every day's great at your Junes!"

Personally, Souji found the jingle a bit on the cheesy side. Still, he couldn't help finding it endearing when Nanako started singing. The look on her face was more than worth enduring the corny lyrics. Eventually she paused, looking at him expectantly.

\_Why not.\_ Souji smiled and repeated the jingle.

"Wow!" Nanako said, laughing delightedly. "You're pretty good!"

Souji shrugged, feeling just slightly embarrassed. "I took some singing lessons at my last school," he said. He yawned then, the events of the day finally catching up with him. "Sorry, Nanako-chan, but I've had another long day; getting a crazy homeroom teacher didn't help. Good night."

\* \* \*

><p>Wednesday, 13 April, Early Morning<p>

\* \* \*

><p>It was with a certain degree of trepidation that Souji reached the last intersection before the school. After the previous day's events, he wasn't looking forward to Kinshiro Morooka's idea of a regular class. It was incentive to study, he supposed, given the man's likely reaction to failing grades, but that didn't make the prospect any more pleasant.<p>

He was wondering yet again how King Moron managed to keep his job when he heard a familiar squeaking sound. Stepping to one side, he saw a yellow bike flash past, at least three times faster than the last time. It wasn't swerving around, but still. . .

.

\_CRASH.\_

\_Knew that was going to happen.\_ The other student had been outright catapulted off his bike, landing headfirst in a garbage can, which promptly toppled over. Souji had to stifle a sudden urge to laugh at the sight, the hapless student rolling about on the ground.

"Someone," the other said plaintively. "Help." Fighting back a chuckle, Souji crouched down and helped his classmate extricate himself.

"You okay?" he asked when the cyclist was on his feet.

"Yeah, thanks." His eyes widened slightly in recognition. "You're that transfer student, Souji Seta, right? I'm Yosuke Hanamura, nice to meet ya."

Souji smiled. "Likewise. You sure you're okay?"

Yosuke shrugged, dusting himself off. "I've had worse, especially when Chie's mad. No big deal." He hauled his bike upright. "Say, you hear about the incident yesterday? How they found that announcer's body hanging from a TV antenna?"

"Forget hear about it, I just about walked right into it while Chie-san and Yukiko-san were showing me around." Souji winced at the memory. "Which, seeing as my uncle is in charge of the investigation, could've made King Moron's rant look like a pep talk."

Yosuke whistled. "Close call there. How'd you get out of it?"

"Just told the truth, that I'd been talking to the girls and we kind of lost track of where we were going." Souji shrugged. "Uncle Ryotaro wasn't happy about it, but I persuaded him that it wasn't our fault."

"Got lucky; with my luck I'd have said something stupid and gotten hauled in for questioning." Yosuke shook his head. "You think it was some kind of warning? There's no way a body would get up there by accident."

"Either that, or the killer is just plain nuts," Souji agreed. "Maybe both; not being a psychopath, I wouldn't know."

Yosuke chuckled at that. "Yeah, it's pretty messed up. Then again, it's pretty messed up to kill someone in the first place." He glanced at his watch, and his eyes widened again. "Damn, we're late! You want a lift? It's a little squeaky, but it'll get us there."

Souji honestly wasn't sure which was more frightening, Kinshiro Morooka's likely reaction to tardiness, or Yosuke's bike. After a quick mental debate, he decided to take his chances with King Moron. After all, his homeroom teacher couldn't actually kill him. Probably.

\* \* \*

><p>Morning<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Souji and Yosuke made it to class just barely in time, thus avoiding any sniping about being late. Chie looked like she might like to, at least at Yosuke, but kept her peace. Souji was relieved; after seeing what had happened to Yosuke the previous day, he didn't want to chance the martial artist's temper.<p>

Being on time didn't save them from King Moron's standard lectures, of course. "Shut up, you idiots!" he snapped. "You are in high school, you know! Don't you have any common sense!?"

Enough common sense to know the school administrators lost it when they hired you.

"First of all, my job is to waste my precious time teaching you morons philosophy. And since I'm such a nice guy, I'll straighten out your attitudes while I'm at it! Don't you feel honored!?"

I feel like I've been tossed into a cave with a rabid wolverine, actually. Straighten out your own attitude before you worry about ours, sloth-face. Normally Souji tried to maintain a modicum of respect for teachers even in his mind, but Morooka made that nigh-impossible.

"And I'll be especially hard on any of you morons who get curious about the murder! Got it!? Good. Now get your books out!"

Souji complied, the less honorable part of him wishing distantly that

Morooka had been the victim instead of that announcer. \_I have to listen to this tripe six days a week for the next year. I almost wish \_I\_ was the victim; at least then this knucklehead wouldn't be cursing my ears off.\_

\* \* \*

><p>After School<p>

\* \* \*

><p>At least this time he'd managed to avoid getting singled out by King Moron. Morooka's lecture had been condescending and peppered with all sorts of nasty remarks, but none had been directed at any particular student. He hadn't even assigned any homework, though Souji strongly suspected that was simply because they'd barely started.<p>

Behind him, Yosuke stretched loudly. "Damn, I thought that would never end."

"Tell me about it," Souji agreed, stuffing a last book in his bag. "At least he knows his subject; that's probably the only reason he hasn't been fired."

"Not exactly comforting," Yosuke said sourly. "So, you getting used to Inaba?"

"I am, actually," Souji said. He was as surprised as anyone, but the general peace and quiet of rural Inaba felt \_right\_ somehow, after the hustle and bustle of the big city.

Yosuke's eyebrows went up. "That was fast."

Souji shrugged. "It's a nice change. After a while I got tired of the noise. I wasn't sure about it at first," understatement of the millennium, "but when I got here it felt like something just clicked." He looked out the window. "I'll be sorry to leave."

"Eh, think about that later," Yosuke advised. "I know what you mean, though. There's not much to do here, but it's got a certain \_something\_ you can't find in the big city." He grinned suddenly. "Say, you hear about the local delicacy? Grilled steak! Seriously, what's so special about that?"

"You'd be surprised," Souji said. "A good cook can make anything special."

"If you say so." Yosuke picked up his backpack. "Anyway, I know a place you can get it cheap. Want to come along? You helped me out today, so it's on me."

That actually sounded pretty good. He remembered Nanako saying she was going to a friend's house after school, so there was no real reason to head straight home. After a couple of days of uninteresting dinners, grilled steak was an appealing alternative.

Before he could reply, however, quick footsteps approached. "What about me?" Chie said pointedly. "No apologies for breaking my DVD?"

\_Chie, I seem to recall he \_did\_ apologize yesterday.\_ Not that Souji was crazy enough to point that out.

Yosuke sighed. "You always show up when I'm talking about food. . ."

\_Not going anywhere near \_that\_ one. I'd rather stay alive.\_

"How about it, Yukiko?" Chie said, hands on her hips. "Don't you think he should treat us?"

Fortunately for the continued sanity of all concerned, Yukiko shook her head. "I'll have to pass on that; I really shouldn't gain anymore weight." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Besides, I have to help out at the inn today. It's been busier than usual lately. In fact," she glanced at the wall clock, "I really should be going."

\_Dodged a bullet there,\_ Souji thought, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. If Yosuke's expression was anything to go by, having Chie and Yukiko both along would have broken his budget.

"We should be going, too," Chie said with a smile.

Souji had seen that coming a kilometer away. Judging by the mixture of annoyance and resignation on his face, so had Yosuke. "What . . . I have to treat \_two\_ people?" He waved a hand before Souji could say anything. "I know what you're gonna say. Don't worry about it." He jerked his head at the door. "Let's go, then."

\* \* \*

><p>It wasn't exactly the first time Souji had been to a Junes food court, so he didn't feel too out of place. Maybe there weren't as many people, Inaba being such a small town, but the general ambiance was the same. As it was on the roof, there were a number of covered tables that could be used in inclement weather.<p>

Souji sat across from Chie at one of the smaller round tables while they waited for Yosuke to collect their orders. In deference to his new friend's wallet, Souji had kept his relatively small, opting for a hamburger and soda. Chie had chosen similarly, after some grumbling.

"\_This\_ is your idea of a cheap location?" she said when Yosuke returned. "They don't have grilled steak \_here\_."

He shot her an annoyed look. "Well, since you hopped on the freeloader train, I had to change my plans. I'm not made of money, you know."

"That's no reason to take us to your place," Chie countered.

"Since when is this \_my\_ place?" Yosuke said. When Souji looked at him in confusion, he said, "Oh, sorry, I haven't told you yet. I actually just moved here about six months ago. This Junes outlet just opened up, and my dad was sent here to manage it." He grinned. "So I'm kinda like you."

Souji took a bite of his burger. "The food's good," he allowed, chasing it down with a gulp of soda. "A nice way to recover from King Moron's sermons."

"I hear that," Chie agreed. "I still don't get how you survived your first day, Souji-kun. Mouthing off at King Moron like that is dangerous."

"Just Souji is fine; same for you, Yosuke," Souji said. "Usually I've got better control than that, but he pushed a little too hard." He took a sip of his drink. "Guess it's because I'm a convenient target."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Yosuke grumbled. "He wouldn't shut up about me when I moved here, either. Being the 'Junes boy' means I've got a bull's-eye painted on my back for some people." He waved that away. "But we shouldn't let him ruin the rest of the day. Souji, what's your idea of a good time?"

Souji took another sip, gathering his thoughts. "I've always enjoyed kendo; my family were samurai until the late nineteenth century, if you can believe it." He chuckled at the looks that got him. "Aside from that, I've played basketball off and on for years."

Yosuke raised an eyebrow. "Basketball? You didn't strike me as the type. I thought you were more of a bookworm."

"Don't judge a book by its cover, Yosuke," Souji told him, smiling slightly. "It's a good way to stay in shape. Okay, yeah, I like to read a lot, but I need \_something \_to bleed off the energy."

The three shared a laugh at that. Almost despite himself, despite his worries about getting too attached, Souji felt himself relaxing for the first time since his arrival. He felt more at ease with Yosuke and Chie than he had with his classmates at any other school. It was almost like a gathering of old friends instead of his first time hanging out with people he'd met the day before.

\_Maybe it's because almost no one ever looks past the "new transfer student," \_he mused. \_Sure, they're curious, but they're not treating me like some kind of space alien.\_

"You know, it's only been half a year, but I haven't been to the local shopping district much since this place opened up," Chie remarked when they'd finished eating.

Evidently she'd touched a nerve with Yosuke. "Hey, you can't blame it all on Junes," he protested. He glanced over his shoulder. "Hey, it's Saki-senpai. Be right back."

A girl in a Junes uniform had taken a seat at a table not far away. Souji couldn't be sure, but to his eye she looked exhausted, and maybe a bit drained emotionally. Exhaustion he could understand, even in a place like Inaba Junes was going to be busy, but he couldn't help wondering why she would be depressed. And then there was Yosuke's reaction.

"Yosuke's girlfriend?" he hazarded as Yosuke got up.

Chie laughed. "He wishes. That's Saki Konishi. Her family owns a

liquor store in the shopping district, and Yosuke seriously has a thing for her."

Souji grunted. "She's from a merchant family in the shopping district, he's the son of the Junes manager. Sounds like a Romeo and Juliet kind of thing." He frowned slightly. "But why would someone like that be working here of all places?"

"I dunno," Chie said with a shrug. "Yosuke does seem to get along with her, though."

Yosuke was at that moment chatting with the older girl. She appeared friendly enough, but to Souji's eye there was something just a bit off about her body language. It was almost as if she was just going through the motions, putting up some kind of facade. Or, he reminded himself, it might be simple fatigue.

"How's it going?" Yosuke asked, smiling easily.

Saki released a tired breath. "I'm finally on break. It's been crazy today." She laughed. "So what's up with you, Hana-chan? Bringing in your friends to boost sales or something?"

"What? No, nothing like that." Yosuke nodded to Souji's table. "We were just hanging out, and I happened to see you."

"Yeah?" She followed his gaze, eyebrows going up. "Hey, is that the guy who just transferred here?" Ignoring Yosuke's look of surprise, she stood and walked over to where the other juniors were seated. "You're the new transfer student, right?"

Souji nodded, curious. He was used to being the center of attention for the first week or so after transferring, but it wasn't often that upperclassmen expressed interest. "Souji Seta. Pleased to meet you, Konishi-senpai." Looking more closely, she definitely looked drawn, though he couldn't have guessed why.

She waved her hand. "I'm guessing Hana-chan already told you about me. It must be nice to have someone else from the big city to talk to."

"Yosuke's a good guy," Souji allowed. "But it's not because he's from the city. I've only been here a couple of days, but I like Inaba."

Not the answer Saki was expecting, if the look on her face was anything to go by. "I'm glad to hear it. Hana-chan here doesn't have many friends, so it's nice to see him getting along with someone." She smiled. "Even if he does get annoying sometimes."

Yosuke sputtered at that. "Hey, wait a sec! You're the one who's alwaysâ€"

Saki laughed. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding." She glanced at her watch and sighed. "Well, my break's almost up. Back to work I go." She gave Souji a brief smile. "See you later."

More to her than meets the eye, Souji thought. Nice enough, but there's no way that's just job stress.

"And she calls me annoying," Yosuke said with a chuckle, dropping into his chair. "She's even nosier than I am, if you can believe it." He grinned. "She has a little brother, and she treats me the same way she does him."

Chie smiled slyly. "Oh, and you don't want to be like a brother to her. Hit the nail on the head, Souji; we've got a would-be Romeo and Juliet thing going here. The daughter of a local liquor store, and the scion of an invading chain. It's the flame of forbidden love!"

Laying on the melodrama a bit thick, aren't you, Chie?

Yosuke shot her an annoyed look. "Come on, it's not like that."

"Oh, really?" Chie drew out the last word, clearly not believing him. "Well, I've got just the cure for your lovesick heart. You ever hear of the Midnight Channel?" Her smile turned mysterious. "You're supposed to stare at a TV that's switched off, exactly at midnight on a rainy night. While you're looking, another person's image will come on. That person is supposed to be your soul mate."

"Isn't that what you and Yukiko-san were talking about after school yesterday?" Souji asked. "Sounds like an urban legend to me."

"I'm with Souji on this one," Yosuke said, taking a quick gulp of soda. "For a second I thought you were going to say something useful, not some crazy rumor. Talk about childish."

Chie glared at him. "Childish!? So, I'm guessing you don't believe it."

"No," Yosuke said bluntly. "Why would I? It's one of the craziest things I've ever heard. And with all the wacky stories making the rounds at Junes and Yasogami, that's saying a hell of a lot."

Souji stood long enough to toss his empty cup in a nearby trash can. "Every place has its weird rumors," he said. "This isn't the strangest one I've heard, but it's definitely up there."

Chie's glare was more or less evenly distributed between them. "Okay, fine. The weather report says it's supposed to rain tonight, so let's all check it out then."

Souji still thought it was a silly urban legend, but he saw no harm in indulging Chie. With no homework as of yet, it was at least something interesting to test out, even if he thought it wouldn't amount to anything.

Yosuke, by contrast, was still looking mulish. "What, you haven't tried it out for yourself?" He shook his head. "Wow, I'm trying to remember the last time I heard something this stupid." Ignoring Chie's fulminating look, he changed the subject. "So, about that incident yesterday, you guys think it was murder? Ooooh, what if the culprit was lurking around here?" He grinned.

Chie rolled her eyes. "And you say I'm being childish. All I'm saying is, you guys had better try it out tonight."

\* \* \*



><p>Evening<p>

\* \* \*

><p>For the third night in a row, Souji found himself having dinner with just his cousin. He didn't blame his uncle, exactly, what with the murder investigation, but he knew all too well how hard it was on Nanako. Seeing her left to her own devices brought back an old, familiar pain.<p>

At least they had something a bit more interesting to eat. After parting with Yosuke and Chie, Souji had made a point of stopping in Junes's grocery department. Without a better idea of Nanako's preferences, he hadn't been able to do anything particularly elaborate, but she'd assured him that his efforts met with her approval.

Which didn't alleviate the main problem, unfortunately. "Dad's late," Nanako said, sighing.

"Did he call?" Souji asked, setting down his chopsticks.

She shook her head. "He always says he will, but he never remembers."

Souji nodded. "I know how you feel." His head came up; unless he was mistaken, that was the sound of the front door opening. Nanako heard it, too, and was on her feet in an instant, just as her father came in.

By the rumpled look of his clothes, and the dark circles under his eyes, Dojima couldn't have gotten more than a couple of hours of sleep since being called in two nights before. Probably not much to eat, either; Souji had a feeling his uncle had been subsisting on coffee and whatever was in the vending machines.

"What a day," Dojima groaned. "This case is turning everything inside out."

"You're late!" Nanako said, looking decidedly put out.

Dojima winced at that. "Sorry about that," he said, sinking onto the couch. "It's been really busy at work the last couple of days." He stifled a yawn, then twitched a little when Souji pushed a bowl and chopsticks into his hands. "Hmm?"

"I thought you'd like something with a bit more substance than vending machine fare," Souji said, going back to his own dinner. "Least I could do under the circumstances."

Dojima took a bit, chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded in appreciation. "Not bad. Your mother mentioned you'd learned to cook, but she didn't say you were this good."

Souji lifted one shoulder. "I've had a lot of practice over the last couple of years."

"It's sure paid off," Dojima said. "Nanako, could you put the news on for me?"

Nanako didn't look happy about it, but she complied. The image that came on was a familiar one, the pale-haired news anchor with a wide shot of Inaba in the background. Presumably Dojima wanted to know what was being said about the murder case.

"Next, more details on the incident in foggy Inaba." The wide shot was replaced with Mayumi Yamano's picture. "Announcer Mayumi Yamano's dead body was found hanging above a house in this isolated rural town. It has been confirmed that Ms Yamano had been involved in an affair with Taro Namatame, husband of enka singer Misuzu Hiiragi."

\_So much for Namatame's career. \_Souji had seen the results of that kind of scandal before. \_He'll be lucky if he can get a job as a janitor after this.\_

"The police plan to investigate this relationship, and question anyone involved with them."

Souji stifled the automatic urge to ask his uncle how it was going. It would likely draw a rebuke, and rightly so; Dojima couldn't just give out details about an ongoing investigation.

"In addition, we now bring you an exclusive interview with the local student who found the body."

Souji straightened at that. He'd heard rumors that Yamano's body had been found by a Yasogami student, but hadn't been able to confirm anything. A glance at his uncle told him everything he needed to know; a hint of annoyance was showing through Dojima's fatigue.

"Where did they find her?" Dojima muttered.

Souji focused on the TV. Though the face was blurred, and the voice distorted (standard procedure, he knew), it was definitely a girl, with long hair. And he was certain he'd seen her before.

"What went through your mind when you saw the body?" the reporter asked eagerly. "Could you tell she was dead? Did you see her face? Don't you think it's scary someone was killed on a foggy day?"

The girl seemed surprised at that. "Huh? She was killed?"

The reporter appeared surprised in turn. "Uh, so you didn't see anything suspicious around?"

"No, not really." Even with the distorted voice, the girl's puzzlement was obvious.

"We heard that you found it when you left school early. Did you have some kind of personal business or something?"

Now the girl was beginning to sound just a bit annoyed. "Um, that's. . . ."

\_That's Saki Konishi, \_ Souji thought abruptly. \_It has to be. No \_wonder\_ she was looking so down today.\_

The camera cut back to the primary anchor. "A tragedy in the shopping district of a quiet rural town," he intoned solemnly. "Many local store owners are already worrying about lost business."

Dojima snorted. "If they lose any more, it'll be because you're kicking up such a fuss about it," he muttered.

And then came the inevitable commentary. Two guys with virtually no knowledge of the situation giving their uninformed opinions. Souji's father had complained about it many times.

"This is really crazy," one said. "I mean, a body hanging from a TV antenna? Sounds to me like some kind of warning from the culprit."

To his credit, the anchor appeared unconvinced. "However, no one has claimed responsibility for this murder, if it is a murder."

"Loads of prank calls, though," Dojima said sleepily. "People getting their kicks by making our job harder."

"Yet there's still no suspect \_or\_ cause of death," the commentator said. "I mean, what is our tax money paying for, anyway, if they can't figure out something that simple?"

Souji felt a rush of irritation on his uncle's behalf. \_Criminal investigation isn't that easy, you idiot. Especially when the case is as weird as this one.\_

Perhaps fortunately for his sanity, the network cut to a commercial break. A Junes ad, fittingly enough, with the usual tag line and infectiously cheery jingle. Nanako, as usual, was happily singing along, the murder story already forgotten.

"Hey, Dad, can we go to Junes together sometime?" No answer. "Dad?"

Dojima was sound asleep on the couch, the fatigue finally catching up with him. It was amazing, Souji mused, that he'd stayed awake long enough to watch the news report. For that matter, it was amazing he'd been able to drive home.

"Geez. . . ." Nanako sighed.

Souji stood, gathering the dishes. "You need any help, Nanako-chan?"

She shook her head. "I can take care of this. 'Night."

Souji made a point of at least washing the dishes before turning in. With Dojima being run ragged, he wanted to make sure the house wasn't an added source of frustration, and take some of the burden off his cousin. When he'd finished, he bid Nanako good-night and went upstairs. Crazy or not, he'd made a promise.

\* \* \*

><p>Late Night<p>

\* \* \*

><p>As predicted, the rain hadn't let up in the least. Normally he enjoyed watching rain come down, but now Souji couldn't help thinking of how much harder it was making his uncle's job. Slogging through that was a chore; rain, in his experience, was something best enjoyed indoors.<p>

Midnight. Time to see if there was anything to that crazy urban legend. He switched off the lights and turned to face his TV, fully expecting to see nothing but his own reflection.

With a burst of static, the screen flickered to life.

\_That's impossible!\_ Souji was sure he was hallucinating. The image was blurry and flickering, but there was definitely \_something\_ on the screen. Straining his eyes, he thought he could make out the figure of a girl. He couldn't see her face, but she had long hair, and was wearing a Yasogami uniform. She looked like she was . . . in pain almost.

A sharp, stabbing headache struck him without any warning. Pressing a hand to his face, he heard a voice in his mind. \_"I am thou. Thou art I. Thou art the one who opens the door."\_ The voice was male, but not anyone he recognized.

It had to be another hallucination. As quickly as it had started, the pain had vanished along with the voice. The TV screen was blank again as well, showing only Souji's reflection. It had to have been his imagination, all of it. He reached out and touched the screen, just to be sure.

Ripples spread out from where his finger made contact, causing him to draw back. Staring at the screen, breathing hard, he reached out again. This time he ignored the ripples, pushing forward. His arm sank in almost to the elbow, as though immersed in water.

Then he had the sudden feeling of being yanked forward. Bracing his free hand on the TV's frame, he fought against the pull with all his strength. After nearly a minute he broke free and toppled backward, the back of his head crashing against the edge of the table.

Hurried footsteps reached his ears. "Are you okay?"

Souji took another deep breath to steady himself. "I'm sorry, Nanako-chan, did I wake you?"

"I heard a loud noise."

\_Think fast.\_ "I got up to get a drink, and tripped on something. Sorry about that."

"Okay. Good night." The soft footsteps receded.

It was almost ten minutes before Souji had calmed enough to contemplate sleep. He'd started more or less on a whim, after Chie challenged him and Yosuke to try out what both boys thought a mere urban legend. Nothing had prepared him for the results.

He looked again at the TV, his heart finally slowing. \_What the hell\_ was that!?

\* \* \*

><p>Author's note: Here we are, my first venture into <em>Persona<em> writing. Let me say for those who know that I am not abandoning my other main project; I simply need something to avoid burnout, and I've wanted to do this for a while.

A couple of important points to make. First, I have only played the original version, but it will use some things from Golden. (Not Marie; nothing against her, she just doesn't fit with my plans.) Second, I cannot stand the anime, one reason I use the name Souji Seta rather than Yu Narukami for the main protagonist. And lastly, some events will be altered to a degree, to fit my preferences (notably I've always hated the Culture Festival).

A final note, I know this chapter deviates little from the game's script. There was little choice; the game is largely a guided tour at first, and in particular I felt I needed to get the first Velvet Room scene exact. I'll do my utmost to branch out more as the story progresses.

With that in mind, I hope you enjoy the story. ~DS

End  
file.